



Fight For Women's Suffrage In The UK

The right to vote (called suffrage) is at the heart of a democratic country. It means that the electorate (those who are entitled to vote) can have a say over who represents them in parliament. In 1832, the rules for voting specified that a voter had to be male. It was widely considered, even by many women, that women could not make such important decisions. A woman's domain was the home and it was her father or husband's responsibility to look after her. A woman's marriage vows included the promise to obey her husband. It was unthinkable that a woman could have her own say. The prospect of her having a different opinion to her husband was even worse.

Mary Smith was the first to speak up. She wrote to parliament arguing that if women have to obey laws and pay their taxes, they should have a say in selecting the people who make those laws. Mary was not taken seriously. In 1867, the cause was taken up within parliament by MP and philosopher John Stuart Mill. He called debates and put forward petitions but again his attempts were defeated. However, the matter was now firmly on the table.

At the start of the 20th century, campaigners for the vote united under two different organisations. The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) began in 1897 under the leadership of Millicent Fawcett. This organisation became known as the Suffragists. In 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst set up The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The WSPU advocated more direct and militant action. They became known as the Suffragettes. The suffragists wanted to achieve the vote for women through the political means and through education and persuasion. In contrast, the suffragettes believed that this approach had failed. They thought that men would not give up their power without force and used the slogan 'deeds not words'. They chained themselves to railings, disrupted meetings and held protests. They were frequently imprisoned and, whilst in prison, used hunger strikes as a tactic to attract attention and sympathy. As their demands were repeatedly ignored or blocked, the tactics became increasingly forceful. The suffragettes smashed windows and set fire to buildings. Some suffragettes opposed this because it was costing them public support. In any case, neither the peaceful approach of the suffragists



nor the direct action of the suffragettes seemed to be working.

At the outbreak of World War I, the suffragettes and suffragists paused their action.

Emmeline Pankhurst encouraged women to support the government in their war effort.

Women entered employment to help keep the country running. They became everything from police officers and ambulance drivers to farmers, engineers and ship builders. Women showed themselves able to do most things that a man could. How then did it make sense to say they lacked the judgement or intelligence to vote?

In 1918, when the war ended, property-owning, married women over the age of 30 were finally given the vote. Even though women were still not on equal footing as men, this was an enormous breakthrough. It took ten more years of campaigning for women to achieve equal suffrage. In 1928, anyone – whether male or female - over the age of 21 gained the right to vote.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. 'A woman's domain was the home' What does this sentence tell us about women's roles?
2. What does the phrase 'on the table' mean?
3. What word or phrase could replace the word advocated?
4. What is another word for 'deeds'?
5. Which word in the fourth paragraph means 'to be without something'?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

R

Who started the WSPU?

S

Summarise the key difference between the suffragettes and suffragists.

E

What makes the slogan 'deeds not words' effective?

S

Order these events from 1 to 5:

The WSPU began

Property-owning women got the vote

World War I

Women's votes were first debated in parliament

P

Give an example of a tactic a suffragist might have used to try to achieve the vote?